Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Directorate of
Intelligence

~~Secret~~

25X1

Status of the Soviet Aircraft Carrier Program

25X1

An Intelligence Assessment

~~Secret~~

SOV 83-10104
June 1983
Copy 488

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

25X1
Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Page Denied

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Status of the Soviet Aircraft Carrier Program

25X1

An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by
Office of Soviet Analysis. It was coordinated with the
National Intelligence Council.

25X1

25X1

Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Theater Forces Division,
SOVA,

25X1

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

25X1

Status of the Soviet Aircraft Carrier Program

25X1

Summary

Information available as of 1 June 1983 was used in this report.

We believe Soviet aircraft carrier operations during a war with NATO would focus on supporting the deployment of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and defending the sea approaches to the USSR in the Norwegian Sea and Northwest Pacific Basin. Of particular importance in such operations would be the ability to prevent Western antisubmarine warfare aircraft from reaching SSBN patrol areas and to provide air defense for surface combatants. 25X1 the Soviets are also exploring the use of sea-based 25X1 aviation to project power ashore in distant areas during situations short of general war. 25X1

The construction of large aircraft carriers has been a subject of controversy within the Soviet Navy. Although there has been little evidence of this in the last year or so, some opposition to their construction probably still exists, especially among those who believe that resources would be better expended on additional submarines. The future of the aircraft carrier program could be affected, therefore, by changes in the naval leadership, particularly should they take place at a time of change in the political leadership and growing economic constraints. 25X1

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Contents

		Page
	Summary	iii
	Aircraft Carriers in Soviet Naval Strategy	1
		25X1
	Possible Effect of a Change in Naval Leadership	6
	Through a Glass Darkly	7

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

25X1

Status of the Soviet Aircraft Carrier Program

25X1

25X1

Aircraft Carriers in Soviet Naval Strategy

the primary wartime tasks of Soviet general purpose naval forces would be to protect nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) from Western antisubmarine warfare (ASW) forces and to defend Soviet territory from strikes by naval units, especially US aircraft carriers. We believe that in order to accomplish these tasks the Soviets would attempt to control all or portions of the Kara, Barents, and northern Norwegian and Greenland Seas, the Seas of Japan and Okhotsk, and the Northwest Pacific Basin. These sea control operations would involve surface ships, submarines, and aircraft. The Navy would conduct sea denial operations, primarily involving submarines and land-based aircraft, beyond those areas We believe that this wartime strategy will remain essentially unchanged over the next 15 to 20 years, but that new Western developments—especially the deployment of the Tomahawk land attack cruise missile—will induce the Soviets to attempt to expand the sea control and sea denial area,

Operating in these areas, the Soviets would have difficulty providing adequate air support, especially air defense, for the surface combatants. Although the operating areas are within range of land-based strike aircraft such as the Backfire and ASW aircraft such as the Bear-F, large portions are beyond the range of fighters. Under current circumstances surface units would, therefore, have to rely primarily on their own air defense systems for protection. Soviet concern about the air threat to ships is reflected in the introduction of new shipboard surface-to-air missile and gun systems

25X1

25X1

The Soviets recognize the value of having their own sea-based aviation. Many surface combatants constructed since the late 1960s have a helicopter hangar, and the two Moskva-class helicopter cruisers normally carry 12 to 14 Hormone helicopters. In 1976 the first Kiev-class aircraft carrier became operational with an air wing composed of some 18 helicopters and 14 Forger vertical-takeoff-and-landing aircraft. The Forger has some capability for attacking surface targets but only a very limited one for air defense Although it poses a threat to Western ASW aircraft, it would have a poor capability to deal with attacks by high-performance aircraft such as those likely to be operating in the Norwegian Sea in wartime.

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

Both the lack of adequate air defense for surface combatants and the limitations of the Kiev-class ships led to speculation in the US Intelligence Community as to whether the Soviets would eventually construct carriers that were substantially larger and capable of supporting conventional-takeoff-and-landing (CTOL) aircraft. Such ships would give the USSR an improved ability to prevent Western ASW aircraft from reaching SSBN patrol areas and its first real capability to provide sea-based air defense. The air cover provided by carrier-based fighters would support the operations of surface units, including the carrier and its escorts, at greater distances from Pact territory than is feasible with current forces. The importance of air defense for these operations leads us to believe that a large part of a Soviet carrier air wing would be composed of aircraft with good air-to-air combat capability. These aircraft probably would be supported by land-based AWACS or carrier-based early warning aircraft.

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

[1] The terms "sea control" and "sea denial" are subject to a variety of interpretations. In this paper they are used in their most common meaning. That is, a state generally is considered to have "sea control" in an area if it is able to sustain surface combatant and merchant ship operations there with relative security. It is considered to exercise "sea denial" if it prevents such use of the area by its enemies.

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

25X1

In addition to its role in a NATO–Warsaw Pact war, the Soviet Navy performs important peacetime tasks, ranging from routine show-the-flag port visits to support for distant client states during crisis situations and limited wars.[3] Its ability to project power ashore is limited, however, particularly by the lack of adequate sea-based airpower. The Kiev and its Forgers provided some improvement in this area but probably not enough to deal with the modern air defenses and high-performance aircraft in service with many Third World states. The acquisition of even a few CTOL aircraft carriers would result in a major improvement in this area.

25X1

25X1

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

25X1
Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Page Denied

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

25X1

example, wrote in 1962: "My opinion is that these colossal aircraft carriers would be floating corpses should they be used against a powerful opponent who has modern means of conducting war." 25X1

Advocates of carrier construction apparently existed within the Navy, however, and as late as 1967 Admiral Gorshkov found it necessary to call them to heel. In a *Morskoy Sbornik* article he noted that although Western navies continued to place heavy reliance on aircraft carriers, such ships were not appropriate for the Soviet Navy:

> *Some people, here and now, yielding to the hypnosis of this modern experience in the combat utilization of fleets, if one may be permitted to so characterize it, continue to fight for the construction of aircraft carriers. But, at the same time, this loses sight of the important fact that the combat capabilities of aircraft carriers, even the atomic-powered ones, cannot stand comparison with the strike capabilities of submarine and air forces. And, analyzing the ways in which to develop the Soviet fleet, or the fleets of other naval powers, we are all the more persuaded of the correctness of the course we have selected in its construction.*[4]

Because planning for the construction of the Kiev-class ships was probably already under way at this time, Gorshkov's remarks seem to have been aimed at proponents of much larger carriers capable of operating high-performance CTOL aircraft. 25X1

During the 1970s Soviet naval writers began generally to assess aircraft carriers—normally in discussions of Western navies—more favorably. Perhaps the highest praise accorded them was by Vice Admiral Stalbo in 1978:

> *In our view there is no basis to speak of a future reduction in the importance of carriers in armed conflict at sea. Moreover, we must speak of an increase in their role in military operations.*[5]

Soviet Writings. For much of the post–World War II period, writings in Soviet open-source publications such as *Morskoy Sbornik,* the Navy's professional journal, tended to denigrate the aircraft carrier as extremely vulnerable and less effective than the submarine or land-based aircraft. Admiral Isakov, for

[4] "Development of Soviet Naval Science," *Morskoy Sbornik, February 1967.*
[5] "Aircraft Carriers in the Postwar Period," *Morskoy Sbornik, June 1978.*

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

25X1
Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Page Denied

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Because Stalbo has been closely associated with Gorshkov, his endorsement presumably reflected Gorshkov's views at the time and appears to have been directed in part against elements, possibly in the submarine force, who continued to be skeptical of the relative value of carriers. Stalbo's assessment was, however, challenged in 1979 in an article by Rear Admiral Pushkin, the chief editor of *Morskoy Sbornik* and a former submariner. Pushkin's article, which stressed the vulnerability of carriers to submarine attack, suggested a lack of enthusiasm for carrier construction on the part of those who believe resources would be better spent on the submarine forces.

Recent discussions of aircraft carriers in the military press have stressed their positive features. A March 1982 article, for example, ascribed to the US Navy the belief that "under contemporary conditions, when aircraft carriers are acquiring qualitatively new properties under the influence of the scientific and technical revolution, their significance and capabilities in combat at sea are increasing immeasurably." A May 1982 article noted that US carriers "with their great maneuverability and universality, are capable of performing most of the missions facing the Navy in wars using both conventional and nuclear weapons." Such positive treatments continue to be tempered by reminders of the carrier's vulnerability. (A Soviet naval officer stated in November 1982 that only "primitive people" still consider the carrier to be undefeatable.) The major emphasis of the discussions, however, is on the considerable capabilities of the carrier for a variety of tasks in both war and peace.

The reports were conflicting over whether a new carrier was planned, whether it was already under construction, and where it was to be built. Nevertheless, the diversity of the sources and the persistent theme of a carrier larger than the Kiev class suggested that Soviet discussions about or planning for such a carrier had been under way for some time. The most authoritative of these reports was probably that of a discussion between Admiral Gorshkov and a US diplomat in 1979 in which Gorshkov stated that he was "considering" the construction of four or five large catapult-equipped carriers similar to American attack carriers. 25X1

The bulk of the evidence, therefore, continues to indicate that Gorshkov, whatever his earlier reservations, is now committed to the construction of a large aircraft carrier. 25X1

25X1

25X1

Possible Effect of a Change in Naval Leadership

There recently has been speculation, both in the Soviet Navy and in the US Intelligence Community, that Admiral Gorshkov will soon be replaced as commander in chief of the Soviet Navy. Gorshkov, who has held this position since 1956 (he was appointed acting chief in 1955), received two prestigious awards in December 1982—his fifth Order of Lenin and his second Gold Star Medal. The lack of fanfare surrounding the presentations suggested to some that his position in the military hierarchy might be in question. According to a Soviet naval attache, factors involved in the replacement of Gorshkov could include disagreement with Defense Minister Ustinov along "strategic lines." We have no information indicating the nature of any such disagreements, but if they involve the composition of the Navy, Gorshkov's retirement could presage a change in direction of naval construction programs. 25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Fleet Admiral Sergey Gorshkov, Commander in Chief of the Soviet Navy Pictorial Parade ©

Admiral Vladimir Chernavin, First Deputy Commander in Chief of the Soviet Navy and Chief of the Main Naval Staff

25X1

25X1

There have also been rumors concerning health problems that might speed the 72-year-old Admiral's departure. The US attache in Moscow reports, however, that Gorshkov is in vigorous health—a judgment supported by the Admiral's journey in March 1983 to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

We believe that the most likely successor to Gorshkov is Admiral Chernavin, former commander of the Northern Fleet and currently chief of the Main Naval Staff. We have no evidence of any direct disagreements between Gorshkov and Chernavin concerning the programs and policies of the Navy. Chernavin has, however, published oblique criticism of the theoretical writings of Admiral Stalbo, an officer long associated with Gorshkov.

Chernavin's background as a submarine officer might make him even more supportive of that arm of the service than is Gorshkov, whose operational background is in surface ships. Gorshkov is identified through his writings and the nature of Soviet naval construction programs with the concept of a "balanced fleet." This concept, although stressing submarines and naval land-based aircraft as the main elements of the Navy, has included a substantial investment in surface ships. Chernavin's experience as a fleet commander and chief of the Main Naval Staff has certainly provided him with ample exposure to the "balanced fleet" concept and has probably worn away part of any parochial prejudices in favor of submarine forces. If, however, economic difficulties required sacrifices in naval procurement, we believe that Chernavin would be more receptive to slowing down or even canceling the carrier program than would Gorshkov.

25X1

25X1

Through a Glass Darkly

We believe there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the Soviets have an active program to build a large aircraft carrier. Nevertheless, carrier development has had its ups and downs in the Soviet Navy, and the outcome is not yet certain.

25X1

25X1

On at least three previous occasions the Navy was apparently on the verge of acquiring CTOL aircraft carriers: when they were included in the Third Five-Year Plan (1937-42); when the uncompleted German carrier Graf Zeppelin was captured; and when carriers reportedly were included in Stalin's plans for the

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

postwar reconstruction of the Soviet Navy. Each time something went wrong: Stalin changed his mind; the German prize capsized; Khrushchev ordered a substantial reduction in surface ship construction. 25X1

The major threats to the carrier program in the 1980s are likely to come from a combination of economic constraints on defense spending and concern that large carriers are too vulnerable to modern weapons to be worth the huge investment required for constructing the ships themselves, maintaining their air wings, providing escort and support ships, and creating the shore-based infrastructure. 25X1

On the other hand, arguments for the construction of large carriers are likely to include their utility in expansion of sea control areas during a general war with NATO. The writings of authors such as Stalbo indicate that another argument favoring carrier construction is their value in the projection of power ashore in distant areas during situations short of general war. The naval aspects of exercise ZAPAD-81 and the recent construction of ships such as the Ivan Rogov–class amphibious assault ships and the Ob-class hospital ships have indicated an interest in the gradual development of such a capability. The construction of large aircraft carriers would be a logical further step in that direction. The nature of Soviet aircraft carrier development will depend in part on whether the post-Brezhnev and post-Gorshkov leadership will place the same emphasis on the gradual development of such a capability that their predecessors did. 25X1

The weight of the evidence, however, leads us to believe that the Soviets have embarked on an aircraft carrier program. 25X1
25X1

We would not expect a formal Soviet announcement of a carrier program until the first unit is nearly complete. 25X1

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/01/20 : CIA-RDP84T00658R000200130004-3